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HIGH-LEVEL MEETING

Preparing for the 1997 special session of the General Assembly

Report of the Secretary-General

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INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly at its fiftieth session discussed the preparations for its special session for the purpose of an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21 1/ and encouraged participants at the high-level meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development at its fourth session to address matters related to the special session. The high-level meeting could give direction to the special session by identifying, on a preliminary basis, substantive areas of priority concern, given the developments since Rio, within and outside the Commission on Sustainable Development. It could also discuss issues of process such as the link with the follow-up to other United Nations conferences, the making of national information exchange more fruitful, and suggestions for fully involving the private sector.

I. SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

2. At its current session, the Commission will complete the thematic work programme for 1993-1996. In the context of its work programme, the Commission has, in carrying out the tasks mandated to it, furthered the international agenda for achieving sustainable development and taken several initiatives that need to be followed up. The follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development has also taken place in several other intergovernmental forums. The illustrative list of issues, approaches and recommendations that follows attempts an overview of the achievements and an indication of the tasks ahead.

A. Freshwater

3. At its second session, the Commission addressed the declining quantity and quality of freshwater resources. 2/ Convinced that sound, integrated policies could be built only upon reliable data on the magnitude and underlying causes of the problem, the Commission decided to conduct a global water assessment. Preliminary results from the assessment indicate that a number of regions are already suffering from very severe shortages and that others will face a similar situation in the near future. Pollution problems are becoming widespread in all regions as a result of increasing industrialization, the expansion of urban areas and the indiscriminate use of agricultural chemicals. These preliminary results point to the need for major adaptations in production patterns, as well as regional and global cooperation to ensure food security and major efforts to control pollution.

4. The results of the global water assessment will be available in 1997. They may form the basis for internationally agreed strategies for demand-side management as part of an integrated water management approach.

B. Forests

5. At its third session, the Commission established the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests to develop a consensus on a number of priority issues related to sustainable forest management. 3/ The Panel's programme of work involves field application of a number of notions associated with sustainable development to a sector of significant socio-economic and environmental value both to the developing and to the developed countries that use forests for economic development as well as for meeting basic human needs. The Panel will complete its work in 1997.

6. Based on the outcome of that work, the need and direction for the further development of international agreements could be assessed.

C. Oceans and fisheries

7. An important outcome of UNCED was an integrated approach to ocean management. With the completion, since Rio, of the Washington Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, 4/ the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks 5/ and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, 6/ together with the pre-existing London Dumping Convention (Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping Wastes and Other Matter), a set of international instruments has become available for the sustainable management of the oceans and marine ecosystems.

8. The current session of the Commission provides the opportunity to reassess the adequacy of management regimes for oceans and marine ecosystems, and arrangements for integration and coordination at the intergovernmental level, in inter-agency work and in science and research, including monitoring. It is also evident that, while many of the agreements have been concluded at the global level, implementation may be better addressed at the regional level. The nature of the regional arrangements that would ensure effective implementation of specific agreements and promote coordinated areas, issues and agreements needs to be considered.

D. Management of risks

9. The growing understanding of the need to manage the risks that are associated with the production and use of certain chemicals has contributed to further international cooperation on chemical safety issues. It may be recalled that the high-level meeting during the second session of the Commission, put forward as a possibility a ban on the export of domestically prohibited chemicals from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to other countries. 7/

10. The Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS), established in 1994, is mandated to seek consensus among Governments on the development of strategies for the implementation of chapter 19 of Agenda 21 and to undertake periodic reviews of these strategies. The Forum has been invited by the Commission on Sustainable Development to report on its work before the special session of the General Assembly in 1997.

11. The Forum has assigned a high priority to the improvement of information systems, an area in which considerable progress has been made. Negotiations on an internationally legally binding instrument for the application of the prior informed consent procedure for certain hazardous chemicals in international trade have been mandated.

12. The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal has been strengthened by the agreement banning the exportation of hazardous wastes. The aforementioned 1972 London Dumping Convention for the prevention of marine pollution by waste dumping has been significantly strengthened by amendments in 1993 banning the dumping of radioactive, industrial and incineration wastes; a new protocol under discussion would ban all marine disposal except in specific cases that could be shown to have no adverse environmental impacts.

13. Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) have become an issue of increasing international concern, and this issue is only beginning to be adequately addressed in international initiatives. In May 1995, the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in its decision 18/32 8/ invited the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC), working with the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS) and IFCS, to initiate an assessment of POPs, beginning with those under discussion at the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), so as to consolidate existing information, develop criteria for identification of POPs and develop recommendations on international action, including a possible international legal mechanism.

14. The perceived risks for human health and the environment resulting from the production and use of chemicals, in particular those related to chlorine-based chemicals, will undoubtedly continue to be a major topic of international decision-making involving all stakeholders, consumers, industry, non-governmental organizations and Governments alike.

E. Atmosphere

15. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 9/ was one of the key commitments to emerge from Rio and it has been ratified by more than 150 States. The Conference of the Parties to the Convention, at its first session, held in March-April 1995, established the Berlin Mandate 10/ process with a view to strengthening the current commitments of "annex 1" parties (namely, OECD countries and countries with economies in transition) to limiting greenhouse gas emissions and to setting commitments for the period beyond the year 2000.

16. The success achieved in addressing the problem of ozone layer depletion under the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and its fund described as having produced a model for dealing with atmosphere-related issues and for constructive cooperation among Governments, industry, science and non-governmental organizations.

17. Some success has been achieved in addressing transboundary air pollution in Europe, North America and South East Asia, but it remains a growing threat elsewhere in Asia, in South America and in southern Africa.

18. The health and environmental problems related to urban air pollution are becoming a growing concern that requires the increased sharing of experience with integrated approaches to the abatement and prevention of such pollution.

F. Land

19. The Convention on Biological Diversity 11/ was also opened for signature at Rio and is considered one of the cornerstone achievements of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The Convention has been ratified by 145 States (as at 13 March 1996), and the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, in November-December 1994, adopted a multi-year programme of work for the period 1995-1997, 12/ subsequently revised and updated at the second session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention in November 1995. The importance of biological diversity as a cross-cutting issue is coming to the forefront in the international discussions on oceans and marine ecosystems and in the deliberations of the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests.

20. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, 13/ was opened for signature in October 1994 and has been ratified by 25 States (as at 13 March 1996). The Convention incorporates a number of innovative features, for example, action plans to combat desertification are placed in the context of strategies for sustainable development to be prepared with the full involvement of local communities. The first session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention will take place in September 1997.

21. The discussions on sustainable land management during the third session of the Commission on Sustainable Development showed the need for an integrated approach to land management, taking into account the increasing competition for land use for urban development and agricultural production. Further international action may be required to broaden the understanding of such an approach, and (given the seriousness of the problem) to secure a commitment to major changes in land-use planning.

G. Focus on the driving forces

22. The integration of environment and development is the central element of Agenda 21. In order to give more practical expression to this, the Commission decided at its third session to undertake specific work programmes on indicators for sustainable development, on changing consumption and production patterns and on technology transfer. These work programmes identify the core areas where action should be concentrated and will guide implementation and monitoring activities over a longer period. An important feature of all three work programmes is that they involve non-government actors. A major area of work for the Commission will be on the specific proposals that emerge from this work.

23. A closely related dimension is the integration of economics and environment in decision-making. In this area, the Commission pioneered discussions on the links between trade policy and sustainable development, a matter that is currently high in the agenda of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization, and may now wish to send a specific message to the ministerial component of the ninth session of UNCTAD and to the Ministerial Conference meeting of the World Trade Organization in Singapore. It might, for example, wish to:

(a) Encourage UNCTAD at its ninth session to propose further strategies for the implementation of positive measures, at national and international levels, aimed at supporting developing countries in their efforts to move towards higher environmental standards, and particularly at mitigating short-term effects on competitiveness and effects on small-scale enterprises;

(b) Invite UNCTAD and UNEP jointly, in cooperation with the secretariats of relevant multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) to propose guidelines aimed at assisting MEA negotiations with a view to promoting sustainable development as well as compatibility between trade and environmental policies.

24. There are other, similar areas that could benefit from further discussions in the Commission, for example, the use of economic policy instruments to promote sustainability, and institutional arrangements for linking macroeconomic and sectoral development strategies with resource and environment management strategies.

H. Financial resources

25. In spite of some encouraging individual examples of the growth of official development assistance (ODA), as well as of some promising approaches towards mobilizing domestic and international resources for sustainable development identified and explored by the Commission through its Ad Hoc Inter-sessional Working Group on Finance, the overall picture in regard to the implementation of all the recommendations and commitments related to finance as contained in Agenda 21 remains an area of concern. Therefore, financial resources and mechanisms for sustainable development should continue to be seen as a priority both for the 1997 review and for the period beyond 1997. More specifically the Commission could discuss:

(a) Innovative ideas for augmenting the overall flow of resources to developing countries and economies in transition;

(b) Specific modalities for funding sustainable development strategies and projects formulated by developing countries and economies in transition in pursuance of Agenda 21;

(c) Arrangements for coordinated funding of joint programmes for international action formulated by international organizations.

I. Keeping the goal of sustainable development in view

26. The goal of sustainable development is to meet the needs of the present and the future. Hence the focus on driving forces, sectoral strategies, and resource management must be combined with the monitoring of the impact on levels of living (as measured by the incidence of poverty), quality of life, health and education status, environmental risks at the local, national and global level, and similar variables.

27. In the context of its discussion on sustainable development indicators, the high-level meeting may wish to consider how the goals of sustainable development can be kept in view as part of the monitoring process.

II. NEED FOR A SECTORAL PERSPECTIVE

28. The preliminary conclusion from the period 1992-1996 with regard to natural resources may be that most of the international frameworks for their sustainable management are in place or under development. More focus should now be given to addressing the driving forces that impact on them. Agenda 21 identifies them in its sections I (Social and economic dimensions) and III (Strengthening the role of major groups).

29. The crucial link between driving forces - economic growth and trade, consumption and production patterns and population growth - and resource management comprises the economic sectors that often define the way policy-making and implementation is organized. For example, the impact of demand growth and development on land resources is determined in large measure by agricultural policy and human settlement policy. To be truly effective, the Commission's consideration of resource management issues must be combined with an equal emphasis on sectoral policy development. For many sectors, like agriculture, fisheries, forestry, industry, human settlements and social services, there are existing forums in the United Nations system that deal with these matters. The impact of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and Agenda 21 on the work in these forums has helped to inject considerations of sustainability into their discussions. However, there are some gaps and, from the perspective of sustainability, the most obvious one relates to transport and energy.

30. The High-level Advisory Board on Sustainable Development considered the issue of transport at its fifth session (29-31 January 1996) and reached the following preliminary conclusions:

(a) The transport sector is of fundamental importance in national, regional and international strategies of sustainable development. Transportation issues which have hitherto been addressed primarily at the national and regional levels by intergovernmental bodies should now be given attention by an appropriate intergovernmental body at the international level;

(b) Greater international cooperation is also needed. In view of the strong international competition in automobile markets, and the relationship of national manufacturers to their government, effective action needs to be taken at the international level to develop more effective and stringent regulatory frameworks, such as internationally agreed standards for air quality, motor vehicle emissions and fuel economy, at least among OECD countries. Similarly, fiscal and pricing mechanisms for restraining transport demand, especially fuel or energy taxes, need to be implemented or coordinated at the international level.

31. The Board intends to continue its discussion on the transport sector in the context of its preparations for 1997.

32. At its second session, the Committee on New and Renewable Sources of Energy and on Energy for Development (12-23 February 1996) stressed the crucial role of energy in economic and social development and environmentally sound development. It underscored the need to evolve strategies and programmes to ensure a sustainable regime for energy supply and consumption in the twenty-first century. At the same time, it noted that, at this stage, a holistic and concerted approach among the organizations of the United Nations system to the assessment, development, utilization and management of energy resources is lacking.

33. The high-level meeting may wish to consider how the sectoral perspective can be introduced into the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development so that the integration of environment and development is effectively reflected in its work.

III. ISSUES OF PROCESS

34. The follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development has involved many innovations in the United Nations process - the high level of participation in the Commission on Sustainable Development, the strong inter-agency process, the extensive inter-sessional activity, the arrangements for follow-up at the national level and the organized involvement of non-governmental organizations; but in the light of experience, the high-level meeting of the Commission may wish to examine the links with follow-up to other United Nations conferences, the link between international and national follow-up and measures to strengthen the involvement of the private sector.

A. Links with other conferences

35. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was the first in the present cycle of global conferences; and Agenda 21, adopted by the Conference, has a broad sweep which includes many areas, like trade and development, demographic developments, poverty, and the role of women in development, that were covered more extensively in subsequent conferences. The same will be true for the issues of human settlement after the forthcoming United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) and for some issues relating to sustainable agriculture and land management after the forthcoming World Food Summit. Hence the follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development has to be seen as part of a broader process that seeks to bring together the follow-up to all United Nations global conferences.

36. The high-level meeting of the Commission may wish to consider the particular role of the Commission regarding issues that are being pursued in some depth elsewhere as part of the follow-up to subsequent conferences.

B. National follow-up

37. Over 100 countries have established national environment plans or national strategies for sustainable development; these include environmentally oriented development plans, such as those increasingly sponsored by the multilateral lending agencies, and integrated approaches to greening the policies of industrialized countries. The key challenge recognized by policy officials involved with these plans is in translating their objectives into feasible implementation measures. Monitoring progress in terms of outcome (environmental and socio-economic improvement) rather than process (design and publication of plans) remains elusive in the majority of countries.

38. In the four years since the establishment of the Commission, 73 countries and 10 regional organizations have provided information on follow-up activities related to Agenda 21 since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Since the third session of the Commission, oral presentations by selected countries, followed by discussion, have supplemented the written reports.

39. At the recommendation of the General Assembly, the United Nations Secretariat is preparing, for the special session of the Assembly in 1997, country profiles that are based on information received through national reporting and from other official United Nations channels. That each chapter of Agenda 21 is to be summarized in a two-page format will result in a fairly succinct country profile for each reporting country. The profile will focus on progress made and constraints encountered in implementing Agenda 21, supported by statistics, wherever available.

40. The high-level meeting may wish to consider how the role of the Commission as a platform for exchange of national experiences can be strengthened.

C. Role of the private sector

41. As a result of environmental regulation, private investment expenditure for environmental protection has significantly increased in many countries. For example, in OECD countries in the past decade, private investment for environmental protection increased both in absolute terms and as a percentage of gross national product (GNP). A significant increase in private sector investment for environmental protection also occurred in the newly industrialized developing countries, while in economies in transition a marked increase is expected in the future, in particular in economies with a rapid rate of privatization of industries.

42. In the years to come, it will be necessary to increase the share of private investment in environmental protection and sustainable development because of the tight budget constraints in most countries. Furthermore, the flow of ODA to developing countries remains below the United Nations agreed target of 0.7 per cent of GNP in most of the donor countries.

43. It is evident that industry has a major role to play in achieving sustainable industrial development, and there are encouraging signs that industry is taking this responsibility seriously, partly because of the growth of environmental legislation and growing environmental awareness. Besides, new partnerships between Governments and business are developing as environmental policy for industry becomes focused less on regulation and control, and more on cooperation and incentives.

44. At this stage, the high-level meeting may wish to take stock of the discussions that will take place during the current session of the Commission on private investments (in the context of the discussion on financial resources and technology transfer) and on the contribution of business and industry to sustainable development (in the context of the Day of the Workplace) and to provide further policy guidance.

45. The high-level meeting may also wish to consider whether industry and sustainable industrial development should have a more identifiable place in the agenda of the Commission on Sustainable Development beyond 1997.

Notes

1/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992, vol. I, Resolutions Adopted by the Conference (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigendum), resolution 1, annex II.

2/ See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 13 (E/1994/33/Rev.1), chap. I, sect. D.3.

3/ Ibid., 1995, Supplement No. 12 (E/1995/32), chap. I, sect. D, para. 204 and annex I.

4/ Document UNEP (OCA)/LBA/IG.2/7.

5/ Document A/50/550, annex I; see also A/CONF.164/37.

6/ Report of the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Twenty-eighth Session, Rome, 20-31 October 1995 (C 95/REP) (Rome, FAO, 1995), appendix I.

7/ See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1994, Supplement No. 13 (E/1994/33/Rev.1), chap. II, para. 11.

8/ See document A/50/25, annex, decision 18/32.

9/ Document A/AC.237/18 (Part II)/Add.1 and Corr.1, annex I.

10/ Document FCCC/CP/1995/7/Add.1, chap. I, decision 1/CP.1.

11/ See United Nations Environment Programme, Convention on Biological Diversity (Environmental Law and Institutions Programme Activity Centre), June 1992.

12/ See document E/CN.17/1995/27, annex, para. 4.

13/ Document A/49/84/Add.2, annex, appendix II.